

## Recognised the abilities of differently-abled persons

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At about the same time when the Caring Society Summit was launched by the Prime Minister, where he captured the hearts of a group of Universiti Sains Malaysia students, Ray Charles (1930-2004), the genius of "soul music" died (June 10).

Like the group of students, Ray Charles ( [www.raycharles.com](http://www.raycharles.com) ), would fondly be known as *orang kelainan upaya*, OKU for short, in the USM campus.

The acronym OKU literally translates as "differently-abled persons" who otherwise are commonly referred to as "disabled persons" or *orang kurang upaya* by society.

This designation is not only unfortunate but inaccurate. The reason is plain enough: the so-called "disabled" person is only perceived as such by those who regard themselves as "abled" in appearance, not necessarily substance.

Take Ray Charles, for example. He is a 12-time Grammy winner and performed his 10,000th concert in May last year. And this is the Ray Charles who could not see from the age of six.

Like Ray Charles, those from the USM group some of whom are PhD holders, others have different talents and capabilities.

One of them. Tan Chin Chin, who drew the attention of the crowd at the summit including the Prime Minister and other ministers, was among the best in her course with a CGPA of 3.7.

Indeed, Chin Chin is the first person suffering from cerebral palsy to enter a Malaysian university privilege that she acknowledged to the chance to further her studies.

In short, we also need to remind ourselves of those other individual who are truly differently abled in that they can do extraordinary things like write and even paint with their legs and mouths.

Many of these things normally "abled" persons are not able to do, let alone excel in.

The ultimate example perhaps is Cambridge professor and theorist, Stephen Hawkins ( [www.hawking.org.uk](http://www.hawking.org.uk) ) who the scientific community regards as being in the same league as Albert Einstein.

The main difference is Hawkins suffers from a degenerative disease that has paralysed him from neck downwards since his school day.

This makes him differently-abled—so different that he stands up as a giant in the world of science and technology.

Is he then "disabled" or *kurang upaya*? Or is it not better to acknowledge people like him for what they are, namely "differently-abled" or *berkelainan upaya*, which is not only true but more importantly, not derogatory or demeaning.

Moreover, once we accept that people are differently-abled, then providing them with the appropriate "facilities and care comes naturally.

Take the Paralympics. It is specially designed so that those best suited for it can take part and excel — just like the Olympics.

Like in sports, the same should be the situation in the broad segment of societal activities, where the differently-abled have the opportunity to be fully productive as members of the society.

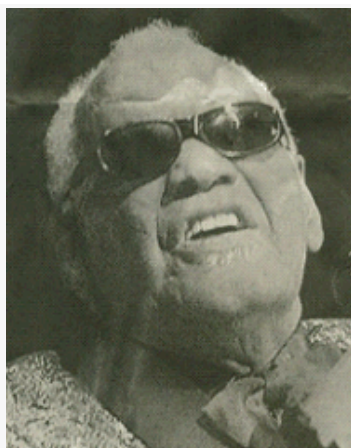
To quote Ray Charles (*Time*, June 21): "But there are always two ways to do everything. You've just got to find the other way". This is a responsibility that we have not fully been able to comprehend and execute.

After all, in a sense, every one of us is differently-abled. It is just that we 'have not been paying too much attention to meeting the needs of those with the more common abilities and gifted children.

Thus, it is high time that those with other abilities were given the opportunity.

The sooner this is done, the sooner we will be able to realize and appreciate how they can also be "normal" members of the community. And that those who are differently-abled are no different from all of us.

It is because of the skewed perspective that some are perceived differently and put in relatively disadvantaged position.



Ray Charles: A musical genius

As Pete Moore, author of *Being Me – What it Means to Be Human* (2003), noted:

"We commonly look at people as if they are defined by their physical abilities. Traditionally, we haven't expected any wheelchair-user to get a place at a university or to want to go shopping.

"Consequently, most of our public spaces are inaccessible to them or, at best highly inconvenient."

He continued: "We are reminded that they are every bit spiritual, conscious and social.

"If we remembered to focus on these elements of people's different beings when we designed facilities, there would be a greater chance of naturally creating environments that are inclusive of people with all levels of ability."

More interesting still, all of us are in some ways disabled.

Once again, to quote Moore: "A holistic view of humanity would also show that many more of us are disabled than we might initially think.

"If we are concerned only about our children's physical fitness, but ignore their spiritual growth, then we are liable to produce children with a spiritual disability."

Similarly, if in offering to help others intellectually, we ignore their ability to develop social skills (read: emotional intelligence), we will find ourselves in a society that is relationally disabled.

This viewpoint needs further re-examining based on what is happening around us — the murders, rapes, bullying as well as crimes and violence of all sorts, involving all age groups and levels of education.

It only goes to show that it is not sufficient just to be physically perfect and academically meritorious; if we are impaired and disabled in many other ways – socially, economically, relationally, and especially spiritually. Worse, not realizing that one is disabled or wanting to do anything about it.

As Ray Charles said: "Most people expect me to help the blind, but I don't think they need help. After all, I'm blind and I'm doing all right."

Indeed, he has done uniquely well by allowing his "mind and understanding to expand" (to use his own words) in the things that he wanted to do best.

This is his other way, a lesson that all of us could heed and learn well in our own journey towards excellence and caring.

It is time that we got rid of the self-limiting notion of *orang kurang upaya*. Instead/recognise that we are all *orang kelainan upaya* (differently-abled person) and begin to respect the rights and the space of others to do what they want to do best.

Only then can we live in a truly caring environment where everyone's potential can be realised. And, start living "beyond me" to know what it is like to be human.

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